# Workplace Learning

# Needs Assessment Report

### For

# ACME COMPANY

*Prepared by:*

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## ✔ *Introduction:*

The Needs Assessment process developed by the University of Southern Maine's Center for Workplace Learning (CWL) is based on 10 years of experience creating workplace education programs to address individual and organizational needs. The purpose of the Needs Assessment for ACME was to:

➢ Create a profile of training and development practices at ACME
➢ Assist ACME in understanding the organizational effectiveness of the company from the perspective of how well it promotes learning on the part of the employees throughout ACME
➢ Describe training and educational needs at ACME, as they relate to individual and organizational development
➢ Make recommendations for specific training and workforce development activities at ACME

The Center for Workplace Learning conducted Learning Needs Assessment Interviews with nineteen (19) ACME employees. Initially, ACME retained CWL to conduct interviews with eleven (11) employees. The first set of interviews, with employees determined by ACME, were conducted on March 12, 2003. Preliminary feedback from those interviews was provided to Liesl Malone. Subsequently, ACME requested another round of interviews with employees to be selected at random by CWL staff. An additional eight (8) interviews were conducted on April 1 and 3, 2003.

A sample of the entire survey instrument is attached at the end of this report.

## ◉ *From the Interviews... what we heard people say:*

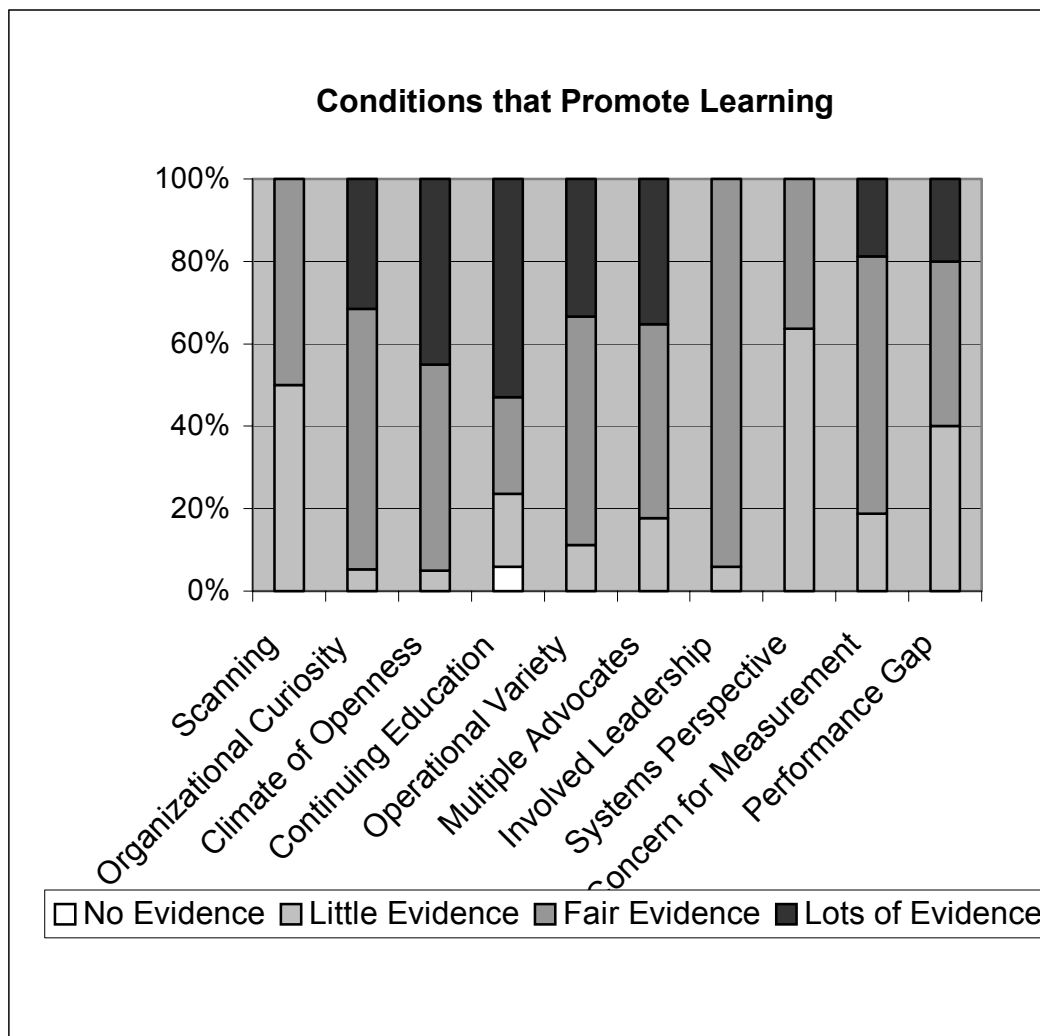### General Comments and Graphs

#### ★ People like working at ACME

♦ Co-workers are generally friendly and supportive and make the work enjoyable
♦ Culture is generally open and informal
♦ Staff are willing to help each other with questions
♦ Work is usually fast paced; everyone works hard
♦ Work provides a positive challenge
♦ Opportunity to work with new technology
♦ There are opportunities to learn outside of one's job description
♦ There are opportunities for growth
♦ Good benefits and vacation policy

#### ★ What people generally find upsetting at ACME

♦ There's not enough quality job-specific training
♦ Keeping up with the rapid growth is hard

- ♦ No time to learn the necessary technical information
- ♦ Staff is too busy; hard to get help/information in a timely or thorough manner
- ♦ Trying to stay focused on job is hard; interruptions happen frequently
- ♦ Not receiving regular feedback, even informally, on performance
- ♦ Communication, in general, is difficult due to growth and busyness of staff
- ♦ Little opportunity to implement ideas from regular staff
- ♦ Lack of consistency in expectations, training, performance feedback, and rewards.

★ **As an organization, evidence of conditions that promote learning are mixed:**



**Conditions that Promote Learning**

Legend: ☐ No Evidence ☐ Little Evidence ▨ Fair Evidence ■ Lots of Evidence

Categories: Scanning, Organizational Curiosity, Climate of Openness, Continuing Education, Operational Variety, Multiple Advocates, Involved Leadership, Systems Perspective, Concern for Measurement, Performance Gap

This graphic presents the employee's view of the level of evidence of certain organizational behavioral conditions that are known to promote learning.  The strongest evidence exists in four areas: Organizational Curiosity, Climate of Openness, Operational Variety and Involved Leadership with the majority of employees indicating fair or lots of evidence of these characteristics.  Two areas with the majority of employees saying there is little or no evidence that these behaviors exist are Scanning and Systems Perspective.  One important note;

Continuing Education was defined by the majority of respondents as ACME's Education Reimbursement Policy.

★ **People's opinions about the learning climate are also mixed:**

## Opinions about the Learning Climate



(c-f = customer-focused)
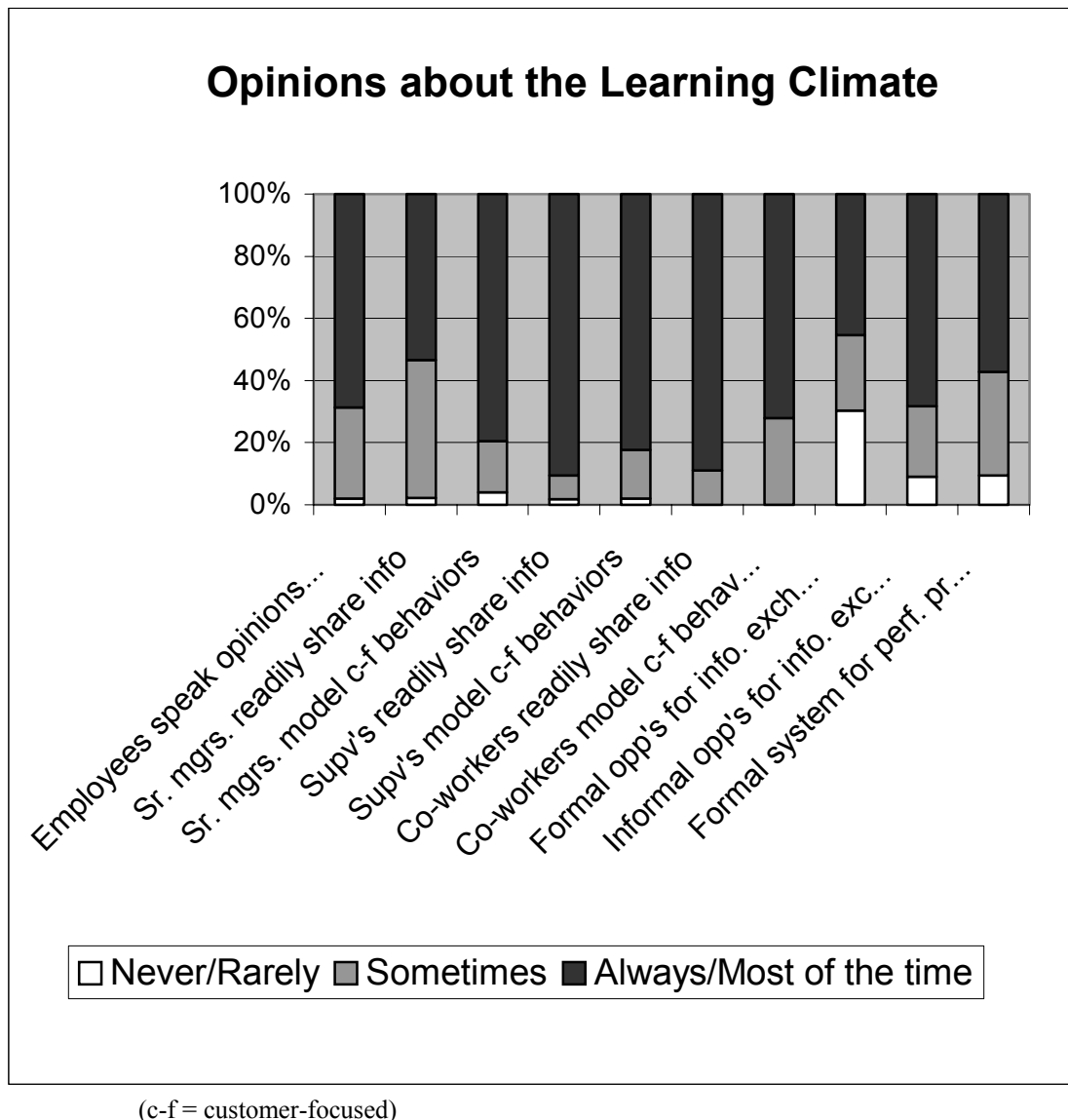
This visual representation shows that while most of the organizational characteristics that promote a positive learning climate are strong, some are in need of improvement. The weakest indicators are those dealing with the existence of **Sr. Managers Approachable and Willing to Share Information** and **Formal Opportunities for Cross-Functional or Cross-Departmental Sharing of Information.** Comments made to this set of questions provided more information: 1) the level of information sharing can be dependent on the particular team leader; 2) it is not uncommon for information shared among co-workers dealing with customers to be "venting" in

nature; 3) there is no formal Quality Assurance Program; and 4) overall, responses to this set of questions show, for the most part, goodwill among ACME employees.

★ **Aggregate results regarding responses to training/learning opportunities and value[1]**

| Training Activity | N/A[2] | Not Often | Often | Low Value | Medium Value | High Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| On-The-Job Training | 4 | 6 | 9 | 2 | 3 | 14 |
| Mentoring or Coaching | 10 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 13 |
| Team/Workgroup Meetings | 1 | 7 | 11 | 3 | 5 | 11 |
| Formal Training Programs | 10 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 11 |
| Conversations with Supervisors | 1 | 1 | 17 | 1 | 2 | 16 |
| Conversations with Managers | 1 | 2 | 16 | 1 | 3 | 14 |
| Conversations with Co-workers | 4 | 4 | 11 | 0 | 3 | 15 |
| Performance Reviews | 2 | 10 | 7 | 0 | 9 | 8 |

- Employees view learning and training as an extension of the orientation process - primarily focused on job skills and occurring for a short time after one is hired into a position.  This process is viewed as having a very high value.  However, half of those interviewed said that on-the-job training did not occur very often or was not available to them.
- Mentoring and/or Coaching was identified as having a high value, however the majority of employees indicated by their responses that opportunities to have a Mentor or Coach existed not often, if it all.
- Over half the employees place a high value on training, however, all employees, with one exception, responded that programs either did not exist, and when they did, programs did not occur often.
- Informal opportunities to learn from co-workers, supervisors and managers are high in both frequency and value.
- Performance reviews were viewed by the majority as occurring not often.  In general, the majority of employees placed medium and high value on receiving a review.
- Employees were evenly divided when asked if they received regular feedback on how they were doing (No - 10, Yes -9).

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[1] Not all respondents gave a value assessment
[2] * N/A means that either the employees was not aware, was not included, or is not included in the activity.

- Responses to attendance at and value of New Employee Orientation indicate employees have a high value for this, however, less than half actually attended an orientation program.

★ **Assessment of competency/skills gap between importance to job and ability of the following skills: Math/Measurement, Reading, Writing, Oral Communication, Problem-Solving, Teamwork, Computer**

In general, interviewees report that their skill level in each of the areas mentioned above matches the importance of that skill to their job. There were some areas where 30% of interviewed employees reported their skill level as low to medium however the importance of those skills to the job were perceived as high. Those skill areas were: Teamwork, Math/Measurement and Writing.

## General Themes That Emerged from the Interviews

★ **Communication –** Issues regarding the current lines of communication at ACME reveal that workplace morale and productivity are impacted.

➢ There is a lack of standards regarding how information is disseminated throughout the organization. This includes both interdepartmental and communications between levels of workers (e.g. management to line workers, manager to manager, upper management to middle management and line workers).

➢ Interviewees spoke repeatedly of a lack of clarity in communications, such as who the recipient was and what was the intended outcome of the information.

➢ There is no norm of expectations regarding interactions between departments, between management and other levels of staffing and amongst employees. Interviewees provided examples of communication, both oral and written, that was perceived as lacking in respect (e.g. using public venue, *Acme's intranet system*, to reprimand employees).

➢ Interviewees reported concerns regarding providing good communication and customer service to external customers. There is a felt need for support on how to handle difficult customers and the use of appropriate tone and language with customers.

➢ There is no standard regarding the use of *Acme's intranet system*. Many interviewees felt that *Acme's intranet system* is used in non-productive ways. Additionally, it was expressed that information sent on *Acme's intranet system* was too general and not directed to those who needed to receive it. Many interviewees believe that there is too much reliance on *Acme's intranet system* and that it should not be the only information delivery system.

➢ Policies for how the call tracking system is to be used are either unclear or not enforced. Several interviewees mentioned the frustrations that accompany inadequate, incorrect or poorly written documentation.

★ **Staff Development –** ACME offers a generous tuition reimbursement plan to its employees, but interviewees expressed a need for more learning opportunities.

➢ There appears to be no overall staff training/development plan that would provide for training at all levels.

➢ The New Employee Orientation currently consists primarily of familiarizing new staff with the physical space at ACME. There is minimal formal training on systems, products or services for new staff.

➢ The majority of training happens on the job. There is a great deal of inconsistency with this due to time limitations of a very busy staff.

➢ While many interviewees see the growth opportunities at ACME to be a strength, many (team leaders and managers) expressed a need for leadership/management training as their new positions required skills with staff that they did not feel they had.

➢ ACME's tuition reimbursement plan is viewed as very good. There was concern expressed that the plan was not taken advantage of more frequently by employees.

➢ Interviewees noted the easy accessibility to training via the Web and intranet resources; however, employees felt strongly that significant additional technical training was necessary to perform effectively at ACME. Given the rate of growth within the organization and the rapid development of technology, interviewees did not feel that they were prepared to adequately address the demands of the job, particularly in the support department.

➢ Suggestions were made to separate training components. Technical training would comprise one component, and communication, customer service, team building and leadership another.

➢ Most interviewees indicated a need for training in a setting away from their work station. This would allow employees, including new hires, to attend more easily to training content without the distraction of the hectic work environment.

➢ Lack of time allocated for training was mentioned repeatedly. This includes the fast pace work environment that does not allow employees to explore information available to them via Web resources, training manuals or from other employees.

➢ Training suggestions made by interviewees included (in alphabetical order):

       ○ Coaching
       ○ Communication
       ○ Customer Service
       ○ Leadership/Management
       ○ Networking
       ○ Organizational Development
       ○ Project Management
       ○ Team Work
       ○ Technical
       ○ Time Management

★ **Corporate Culture**

➢ In general, employees at ACME enjoy their work and their colleagues.

➢ There is no standard of expectations regarding behavior at ACME. Interviewees noted that interactions between employees, both written and verbal, are often inappropriate and counter-productive. Also noted was the need to examine how behavior is modeled and its impact on the work environment.

➢ According to interviewees, there is no formal plan in place regarding information sharing. There is a heavy reliance on *Acme's intranet system*, which interviewees did not feel was always the most appropriate vehicle for conveying information. In addition, information is not always directed to the intended recipient, which confuses employees who then are uncertain of what action to take.

➢ There is great concern about time pressures. Specifically interviewees repeatedly stated that there "isn't enough time" to maintain or upgrade their technical skills, or to work with colleagues to troubleshoot. Interviewees expressed concern that the rapid workflow, particularly in Technical Services, compromised the quality of services being offered to customers.

➢ Some interviewees reported a sense of isolation between their department and the rest of the organization.

➢ There is a recognition among interviewees who have been at ACME since the early days that growth brings changes. However, many expressed the desire to have some of the ethos of those days back.

The employees interviewed like working at ACME.  They like the work, the people they work with and the challenges of doing a good job.  However, opportunities to learn, change and develop are not well developed.  Employees long to receive more training, to have an opportunity to make suggestions, and to be trusted to participate in a meaningful and strategic way.  They particularly expressed the lack of feedback about their performance and lack of awareness about what is going on in the company that affects their daily work.  Communication issues mentioned by the interviewees are viewed as a substantial stumbling block.

**Recommendation #1**:  Internal review of current training efforts and development of an integrated training plan, with attention to both short and longer-terms outcomes would be beneficial.

**Recommendation #2**:  Consider developing a New Employee Orientation program to include:
- ♦ Familiarizing with physical space
- ♦ Meeting heads of departments and executive staff
- ♦ Basic communication processes (e.g. *Acme's intranet system*)
- ♦ Policies and procedures
- ♦ Introduction to ACME services and products
- ♦ Processes for handling customers (internal and external)
- ♦ Familiarization with basic technology used at ACME

**Recommendation #3**:  Broaden scope and methods of learning activities.
- ♦ Develop employees through peer coaching/mentoring
- ♦ Expand training opportunities; utilize area resources; include more practice time, role play, real-life scenario based problem solving in the training sessions.
- ♦ Develop cadre of in-house trainers; provide them with "train-the-trainer" training.

**Recommendation #4:**  Increase support for supervisors/team leaders – this assessment raised some questions about how this group is prepared for their roles…supervisory practices appeared to be quite varied across individuals.  Provide some form of supervisor training.

**Recommendation #5**:  Provide Communication training focusing on: core values/trust, understanding team concept, vision, listening, feedback, questioning, dialogue, managing change, conflict, decision making and problem solving; to ACME staff at all levels.

**Recommendation #6:**  Provide Customer Service training to all ACME staff, focusing on: internal and external customers, appropriate language, skills for handling challenging situations, dealing with angry customers, and strategies for providing extraordinary service.

The concept of customer service must be focused inward on the internal "supply chain" of the company as well as toward the external customer.  Employees must learn what others in the company do, what their points of frustration are, and how each employee is connected to every other employee in the process of doing excellent work.  They must come to understand through examination, processing, and training that one person's actions have specific down-stream

effects on every other person's job.  The more positive these effects are, the more productive the workforce and the more profitable the company will be.

**Recommendation #7:**  Provide customized training opportunities, with staff and employee input on specific needs and topics, to stimulate enthusiasm, increase performance level, and increase employee retention.  Specifically, there is a strong need to provide skill enhancement opportunities in the technical skills required for the job.  Employee interviewed desired additional skills that would help him or her do their job better.  This is an incredibly motivated and dedicated workforce that wants to do the very best they can.

**Recommendation #8:**  Consider the desirability of more formalized and varied procedures for managing information flow.  Creation and empowerment of a cross-functional team of employees to assess current process and recommend improved procedures will promote creative/critical thinking and problem solving.  Part of this team's work would involve recommendations on the most effective use of *Acme's intranet system*.  Making this process a high profile activity will improve all employees sense of involvement in achieving the goals of the organization; and will improve cross-functional communication, teamwork and learning.  Skill enhancement in the areas of Action Learning, Teambuilding, and Project Management may be helpful here.

**Recommendation #9:**  Since every employee is a member of the business process, consider ways to breakdown barriers between groups.  Every employee plays a critical role in the ultimate success of the business and every employee must be made to feel that way in order to achieve an environment where the work is meaningful and the workplace is a positive and productive place to be.  Consider both formal and informal mechanisms to create awareness, understanding, and appreciation across job functions.  Training in Teambuilding and Interpersonal Communication are called for here.

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